

**STATEMENT OF
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**BEFORE THE
SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE
MODERNIZATION OF CONGRESS**

**AT A HEARING ENTITLED
“CONSTITUENT SERVICES:
BUILDING A MORE CUSTOMER-FRIENDLY CONGRESS”**

**PRESENTED
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Introduction

Chairman Kilmer, Vice Chair Timmons, and Members of the Committee -

Thank you for holding today’s hearing and for inviting me here today to discuss this important issue.

The Congress, and the House of Representatives in particular, has a uniquely important role in defining the public’s relationship with their government. As one reviews the vast Federal government, with all its agencies and resources, the Members and staff of the House of Representatives are the closest touchpoint for the public to share their ideas and raise their concerns.

We all know the feeling, what it’s like to be delighted by a customer interaction. Review any list of the most popular, most trusted - and often the most successful - brands in the United States and you will see a list of organizations that treat their stakeholders well. Throughout every touchpoint, in ways both large and small, the user experience is prioritized. It’s more than a mere luxury. It’s a feeling of respect, it’s a feeling of being valued, and it creates trust.

At the core, this is what constituent service is all about. Delivering a modern approach for constituent services has the potential to reinvigorate the legislative process, streamline casework requests and rebuild the public’s trust in their national civic institutions.

Recommendations

In my discussions with Members and staff, there has rarely been resistance to the idea of modernization in principle; in fact, it is an idea that is typically met with enthusiastic support. However, in practice, implementation efforts are often inhibited by capacity limitations within Congressional offices.

To confront this reality, the House should initially focus on those efforts which have the ability to substantially enhance its institutional capacity for change management. These can be outlined across three broad categories: ensuring executive sponsorship, enhancing House-wide capabilities and expanding the capacity of individual Member offices.

Ensuring Long-Term Executive Sponsorship: Empowering Constituent Experience as a Core Equity in Congressional Operations

For any large organization, structure dictates behavior and behavior determines results. All too often constituent service improvements are driven by small ad hoc teams, dependent on the executive sponsorship of an individual, rather than empowered by organizational design. The House should ensure that every core competency essential to its success is represented in the senior leadership structure.

For most Americans, the only direct interaction they will have with their elected Representatives is via constituent services, yet institutional responsibility for the baseline quality of those experiences is amorphous. While there are several dedicated public servants who care about this issue working within the House, these concerns are typically only one aspect of a broader portfolio rather than their primary focus.

While the following steps alone would not represent a panacea, if properly implemented, they would provide an enduring baseline of executive sponsorship for efforts to improve constituent services over time.

- 1) The House should designate and empower a senior official with responsibility for coordinating improvements to House-wide capabilities in constituent service delivery.
- 2) Each House officer, in coordination with the aforementioned official, should designate an individual with primary responsibility for improving the constituent services impacted by their respective agencies.
- 3) The Congress should authorize a Constituent Services Experience Advisory Board, with experts selected by the Speaker and the Minority Leader to provide long-term guidance and support.

Enabling and Scaling Innovation

Too many innovation efforts, facing organizational headwinds that inhibit large-scale change, artificially reduce those headwinds by focusing on smaller projects. The opportunity cost created by scaling down, particularly at the level of the United States Congress, should be avoided in favor of those efforts that have the potential for the greatest impact.

Pilot projects without a clear pathway to enterprise deployment should not be confused with a serious, large-scale initiative. To be clear, pilot projects can provide meaningful insights and build operational momentum, however the House should ensure its primary efforts have the ability to scale to the size of the problem.

Towards that end, I recommend the following initial steps be taken:

- 1) **The House should publish a core set of secure, standards-compliant application programming interfaces (APIs)** for the most common constituent services provided by House offices. Similar in this respect to the Communicating with Congress service, these constituent service APIs would enable approved third-party developers/vendors to improve the user experiences provided by House offices to the public.
- 2) **The House should leverage technologies that will remove the extensive inefficiencies that have long faced the daily operations of individual Member offices**, particularly those which are currently handled by entry-level and junior staff, which will free up a significant amount of working hours for proactive engagement with constituents. Time, energy and resources spent performing repetitive, manual processes constrain the ability of all Member offices to conduct higher-value work. There is perhaps no greater opportunity for rapidly expanding the capacity of individual Member offices and, by extension, enabling the widespread modernization of Congressional operations.
- 3) **The House should grant House officers the authority to conduct public prize competitions for improvements to Legislative Branch operations.** This authority should include appropriate ethical safeguards and requirements for bipartisan support. The Executive Branch, using authorities most recently granted in the American Innovation and Competitiveness Act of 2017, has run over 1,200 prize competitions engaging people of all backgrounds in the Nation's most promising opportunities. Historically, the Legislative Branch is no stranger to the benefits of such efforts, as the design of the United States Capitol itself was determined by a public prize competition.

Modern Expectations for a Modern Congress

Ultimately, however, the House should do more than streamline existing processes, it should incorporate modern technology into the overall Congressional workflow. As an institution, Congress needs to ensure that Member offices have the capability to genuinely engage with their constituents in a manner consistent with modern expectations.

In this single week, Congress is expected to consider twenty-six separate pieces of legislation, conduct fourteen hearings, and host countless engagements on a full range of topics. Each event is important to certain constituencies, yet most of those same constituencies will never know they occurred. In this regard, Congress is often like a student who completes their homework and then neglects to turn it in.

Let's consider constituents who communicate with their Representative to express support for a specific issue and, often after a significant delay, receive a generic form letter acknowledging their messages. Meanwhile, several months later, the relevant committee conducts a hearing on that issue and develops legislation that is ultimately adopted on the House Floor. Will those constituents receive updates as the legislation is developed? Will they be invited to opportunities to substantively engage on the issue? Will they receive a proactive message, delivered via their preferred method, from their Representative when it becomes law?

This is more than the communications challenge it is often confused to be; it is the net result of a fundamental disconnect between Congressional capabilities and the public's expectations.

Over a half century ago, faced with the rapid emergence of television, the House embraced new technology and fully incorporated television into its institutional capabilities. Congress did more than simply add an easel to the corner of a room; the House Floor and committee hearing rooms received stage lighting and control booths, becoming elaborate television studios. These capabilities were necessary for Congress to succeed during an era dominated by television.

Today, faced with the exponential impacts of technological change, it is critical that Congress modernize how it conducts its core missions of constituent services. Every new technology rewards those who optimize for what makes that new technology distinct from its predecessors. This new era is defined by interactivity, a uniquely appropriate core competency for a democratic institution.

There have been a few notable experiments in this area that provide useful insights. As Chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee Darrell Issa used an online platform to crowdsource suggestions for committee markup sessions, which after review by professional staff, were presented to Members for deliberation. In 2010, the YouCut platform reached over 5 million Americans every week and transformed Floor procedures into a meaningful act for a large community across the country. In 2014, the Citizen CoSponsor platform enabled the public to share their support for any introduced legislation, automatically follow its progress and receive ongoing updates from bill sponsors.

While producing results, each of these efforts was ultimately the result of individual Member offices; the House should look to these examples, among others, to provide all Member offices with the capability to genuinely engage with their constituents. Ultimately, these efforts will create a shared sense of ownership over the resulting legislative products, improving the institution's standing with the American public.

Conclusion

Every day, somewhat quietly in the background, thousands of constituent interactions are happening throughout Congressional offices. How many of those interactions have delighted people? How many have made people feel heard by their government? How many have created trust?

Restoring the public's trust in our Nation's institutions begins by earning it, one constituent experience at a time.

I commend the committee for hosting this important discussion and encourage the committee to continue to focus on this issue.